



wretched Individuals “Out of a population of twenty millions of people supposed to be in France, there are nineteen millions more wretched, more accursed in every circumstance of human existence, than the most conspicuously wretched individual of the whole United States.”

So said the American minister to France, Thomas Jefferson, who spent four years in France observing conditions. Jefferson exaggerated. The most conspicuously wretched people in the United States were black slaves, who lived far worse than did French peasants.

Three Social Classes

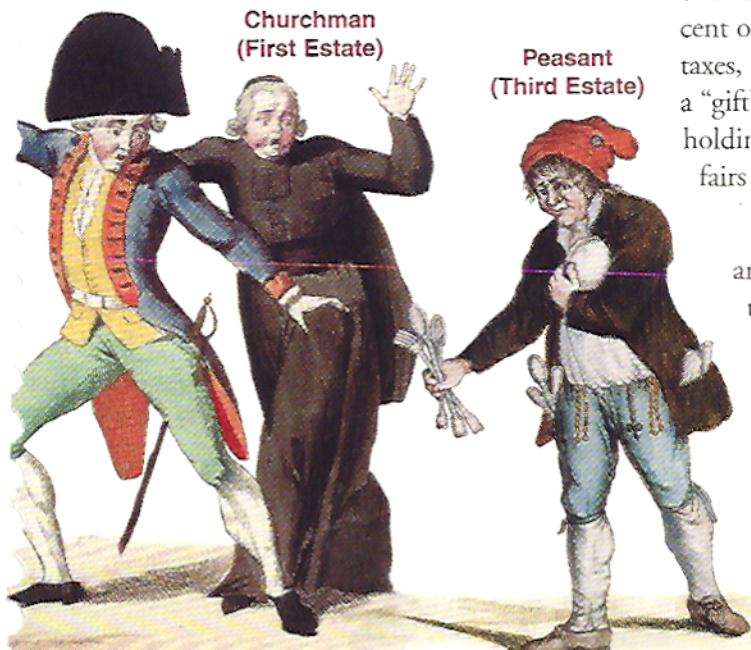
Nevertheless, many French peasants were poor and—if their crops failed, as they often did—hungry. And they did occupy the bottom rung of a rigid social ladder that had been in place since the Middle Ages, which historians call the *ancien régime* (ahnn SYANN ray ZHEEM), or “old regime.”

Medieval society had been divided into three classes: the clergy, the nobility, and the peasants. By the eighteenth century, many things had changed, but French society was still divided into these same three groups that were known as the Three Estates.

Nobleman
(Second Estate)

Churchman
(First Estate)

Peasant
(Third Estate)



The First Estate—the clergy—had remained much the same, but the gap between the wealthy churchmen and poor churchmen had grown even wider. While most parish priests remained poor, other members of the Church were much richer and more powerful. The Catholic Church was the official church in France and had great power. Wealthy archbishops, bishops, and abbots who headed monasteries lived like princes in extravagantly furnished palaces. They often preferred to spend their time at court rather than seeing to their religious duties. It is said that one churchman astounded even the aristocrats at court with his extravagant gambling.

The wealth of the clergy came from **tithes** (THYTHS) and from rents on the land they owned. In fact,

in the 1700s the clergy made up less than 1 percent of the population but owned 10 percent of the land. Although the clergy paid no taxes, they gave about 2 percent of their income as a “gift” to the state. Their wealth and large landholdings meant they had power in guiding the affairs of the nation.

vocabulary

tithe one-tenth of a person's income, paid to support a church

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The Second Estate—the nobility or aristocracy—had changed a good deal more than the First Estate. For one thing, it was no longer a warrior class. Although most

In eighteenth-century France, everyone belonged to one of the three social classes, called Estates.

army officers were nobles, there was no longer a need for armored knights to battle with invaders.

Overall, nobles owned 20 percent of the land. Some were poor, and most had only modest wealth, but a few were extremely rich, hiring managers to look after their property while they lived luxuriously in Paris or at the royal court at Versailles (ver SIGH), near Paris. Nobles had many exclusive privileges. For instance, even the wealthiest among them often didn't pay taxes, except perhaps in wartime. Aristocrats were the only people allowed to hold the highest offices of the Church, the government, and the military. Although by the late 1700s many aristocrats were willing to give up some of these privileges, in return they expected the king to grant them more political power.

The First and Second Estates had a common interest—holding on to their wealth and power. That meant keeping things pretty much the way they were, unless, of course, they could weaken the king and get a little more power for themselves.

The Third Estate had changed most of all since feudal times, and it had the most reason to want more change. Everybody who did not belong to the First Estate or the Second Estate belonged to the Third Estate. That included about 98 percent of the people! In feudal times the Third Estate was made up mainly of peasants. But by the eighteenth century, a large middle class had developed. There were still millions of peasants, but there were also doctors, lawyers, business people, merchants, manufacturers, writers, government workers, and craftspeople. Anyone who was not a clergyman or an aristocrat fell into this category.

Classes Within the Third Estate

All of the classes within the Third Estate had reason to be unhappy with the *ancien régime*. They had spent nearly the entire eighteenth century under the rule of an absolute monarch, and many felt it was time for a change.

Sansculottes wore long trousers and red wool hats. They supported the revolution.

The wealthiest group in the Third Estate was the **bourgeoisie** (boorzh wah ZEE). Some were as rich as nobles, and they dressed like nobles, in powdered wigs, silk stockings, and tight-fitting knee breeches called culottes (coo LOTS). But no matter how rich they were or how well they dressed, the bourgeoisie could not claim any of the privileges of the nobility. A few of the very wealthiest could purchase noble status. The rest were looked down upon by the nobility. Men had to pay taxes (though some bought exemptions). No matter how smart they were or how hard they worked, they could never be promoted to the highest ranks in the Church or the army.

vocabulary

bourgeoisie the middle class who were neither nobles nor peasants

By the eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie had built up a deep resentment against the aristocracy. After all, the bourgeoisie argued, they were the ones who supplied most of the money, engaged in trade, and generally did the work of building the wealth of the country. Many aristocrats did little but sit at court, collect their rents and waste time and money in silly games. And yet these idle, useless aristocrats had the nerve to look down on the middle class!

Despite their resentment, the bourgeoisie generally lived a comfortable life, far better than the other classes of the Third Estate.

The urban working classes within the Third Estate were nearly as poor as the peasants. They were the stonemasons, furniture makers, butchers, weavers, servants, and other workers. Poorly paid, they lived in miserable, cramped housing and existed mainly on



ead, eating as much as three pounds a day per rson. A shortage of bread meant that many nt hungry. The urban workers, especially in ris, became known as the sansculottes (literally, hose without knee breeches") because they wore ng trousers. Later they wore red woolen hats to ow support for the revolution.

Life of a Peasant

The peasants of France were better off than easants in most other European countries. But ey were the poorest members of the Third 'state, and the ones who paid the most taxes. These were the "wretched" individuals Thomas Jefferson wrote about.

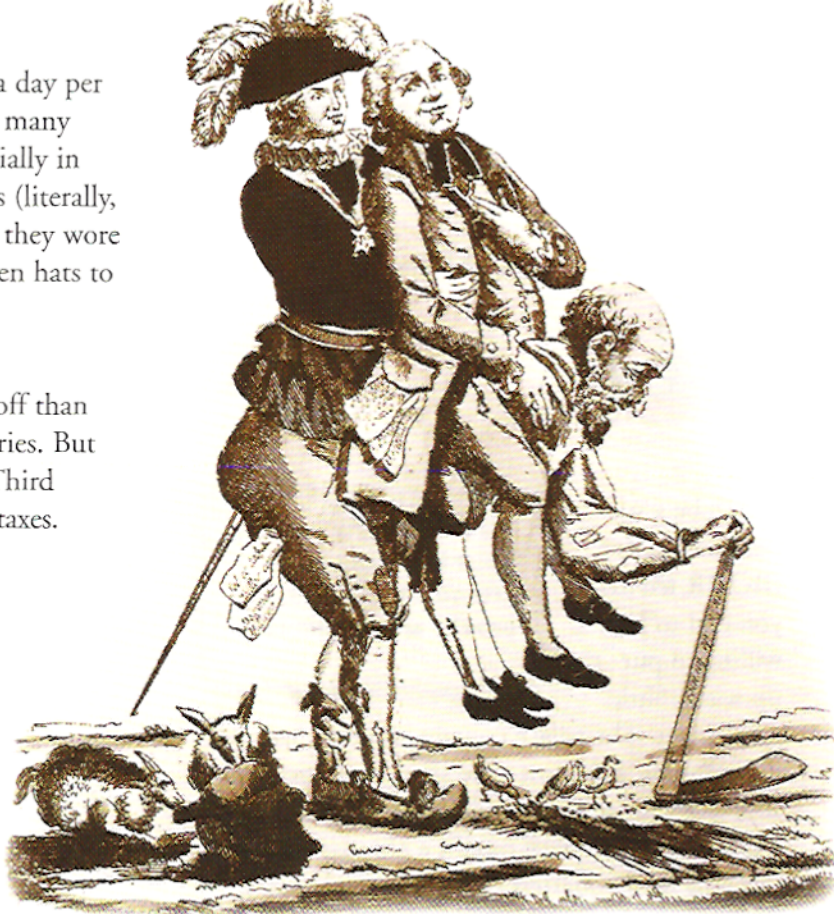
Imagine that you are a young girl, laughter of a poor peasant family in eighteenth-century rural France. What would your life be like?

First of all, your house is very small, with a dirt floor. Your father keeps it that way. If he made any improvements to your house, it would be worth more, and he would have to pay higher taxes.

Most of your time is spent working in the field and garden and taking care of your younger brothers and sisters. The fields and garden don't produce much, just barely enough grain to keep the family in bread. You used to have to milk the cow and put the cow manure on the field for fertilizer. But last year the crops failed and your father sold the cow for food to feed the family through the winter. But it wasn't quite enough, and you and your brother were sent up to the main road to beg for food.

You heard your parents talking the other day—they were upset because your brother was about to turn seven. That too would mean more taxes. Your family has to pay a special tax—a salt tax—for every member of your household seven and older.

On Sundays you go to Mass at the village Church. The priest is generally kind, but your parents are still angry that they have to pay a tithe of 10 percent of what they earn to the



The poor peasant is bent over from the burden of financially supporting the clergy (hatless) and the nobility.

Church. They say that most of the money goes to the abbot, who already has plenty.

Yesterday some men came and took your father away. Your mother said it would be okay—he was going to work on the main road to Paris, which needed repair, but he would be back in a few days, or maybe a week. Several other men from the village had to go too. Your father doesn't get paid for his work. Working for the government for free is a kind of tax, called a *corvée* (KOHR vay), your mother says. But the family is lucky. At least they didn't take your father away to the army, which happened to some men in the next village. Most of those men never came back to their families.

At night your mother sometimes tells stories about her childhood. She grew up in this village, and her childhood was a lot like yours is now. You sometimes wonder if things will ever change.

3 The Absolute Monarchs



Louis XIV—"I Am the State" Would you have wanted to be an attendant at Versailles, the court of the King Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715), the great Sun King? If so, you would have had to follow many rules of behavior in order to find favor with King Louis.

To be a successful **courtier** (KOHR tee ur), you had to be willing to put up with a little discomfort. The palace contained more than 200 guest rooms, but most were small and uncomfortable—cold in winter, hot in summer. If you were lucky, you might have caught a glimpse of the spacious living quarters of the king and queen.

vocabulary
courtier an attendant at court, usually an aristocrat

Most important, you always had to keep in mind that the king was the center of the world. He was the sun, and *everything* revolved around him. You would have taken every opportunity to gain his favor.

Rules of Behavior

A duke who lived at Versailles explained what it took to please the king: "Falseness (acting like a slave), admiring glances, combined with a dependent and cringing attitude . . . were the only means of pleasing him." There was nothing the king loved better—except maybe fame and glory—than flattery. So you had to be ready with

a compliment at a moment's notice—the more extravagant the better. When servants walked past delivering the king's food to his table, you would bow and remove your hat.

Above all, the successful courtier must be seen at court. The same duke said about the king: "Nothing escaped him; he saw everybody . . . anyone who seldom or never appeared there was certain to incur his displeasure." And you had to be prepared to spend money—lots of it. The king liked people around him to spend money freely and wear expensive clothes. But they must never, ever wear anything gray. The king hated the color gray!



The power and the splendor of Louis XIV's court made him the envy of European nobility.

You were required to follow all these elaborate rules of etiquette (and there were plenty more, such as never knock on a door when you want to enter someone's room; instead, scratch it with the fingernail of your little finger on your left hand!). Then someday, if you were very, very lucky, you might be granted one of the highest privileges the king could bestow: you might be chosen to hold the candle while he put on his nightgown!

All-powerful King

Louis XIV was the most powerful monarch Europe and the perfect model of an absolute monarch. Louis XIV sincerely believed that he was God's representative on Earth and that he ruled by divine right. He was only 23 when he announced that he would be his own chief minister. This was an unheard-of step for a king. Kings usually let someone else do the hard day-day work of running things. Louis regularly did it in long workdays governing his kingdom. He believed he was more than just the ruler of the state. "I am the state," he boasted.

The king wanted to break the power of his nobles. He had learned his lesson early. Louis had become king when he was only four years old, in 1643. When he was ten, powerful French nobles rose up against the crown and took control of Paris. The uprising failed, but it left a mark on the young king—he learned to dislike Paris, and he became determined to keep the nobles under his thumb. He had a solution to both problems.

View of Versailles

Previous kings had lived in the royal palace of the Tuileries (TWEEL ree) in Paris. But Louis built the magnificent palace at Versailles,

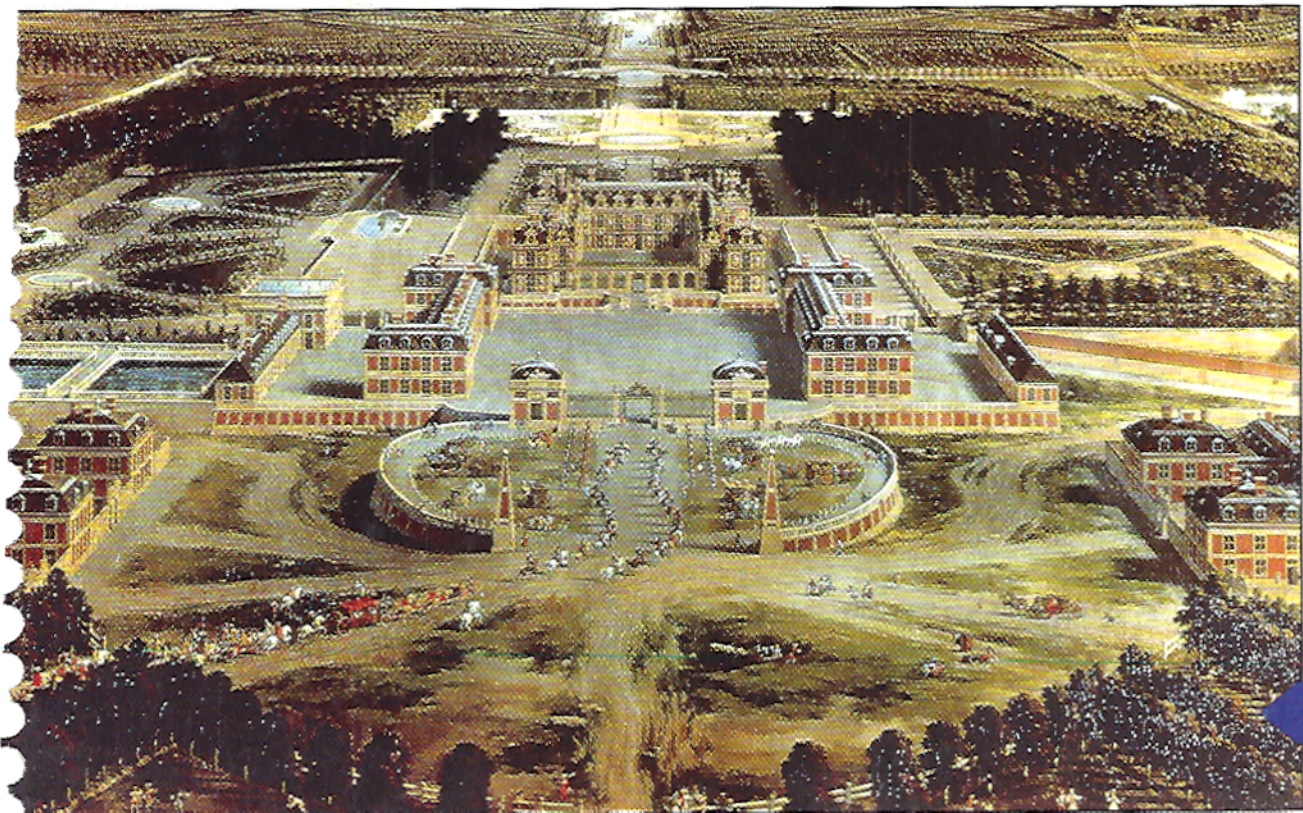
11 miles outside Paris. The palace was as long as seven football fields and was surrounded by grand gardens noted for more than a million red and yellow tulips. The palace contained more than 1,000 rooms, including a library, a theater, council rooms, and spacious apartments for the king and queen.

The most striking feature of Versailles was the Hall of Mirrors. One long wall consisted of 17 tall windows overlooking the gardens. The opposite wall held 17 huge, gold-framed mirrors. At night, the room was lighted by 32 crystal chandeliers holding thousands of wax candles whose light was reflected in the mirrors. Versailles was the center of the cultural world of France and the envy of every monarch in Europe.

Louis insisted that the most powerful nobles—who had often rebelled against previous kings—live at least part of the year at Versailles. There he dispensed his favors, and these nobles became dependent on him. Many turned into idle, corrupt flatterers, gamblers, and gossips.

During Louis XIV's 72-year reign, France became one of the most prosperous European nations and a center of European culture. Under him, art and literature flourished. However,

The Palace of Versailles was built by King Louis XIV. It was the royal residence of Bourbon kings for almost 100 years. Taxing the peasants made this luxurious lifestyle possible.





Louis XV became King of France when he was only five years old.

Louis became involved in long and costly wars. When Louis XIV died in 1715, he was the most powerful ruler in Europe. But France was deeply in debt, and the people cheered at the news of his death.

Louis XV: "After Us, the Deluge!"

Louis XV was the great-grandson of the Sun King. Louis became king when he was only five years old. But Louis XV did not have the qualities of the Sun King. He was ineffective and more interested in having fun than in doing the hard work of governing. Louis claimed the role of absolute monarch, but in practice he was unable to control his ministers. During his reign of almost 60 years, France continued to become involved in costly wars, including the French and Indian War (known in France as the Seven Years' War), in which France lost its colonies in North America and India.

Like his great-grandfather, Louis XV kept his court at Versailles, becoming more and more

isolated from his people. As a boy he was known as Louis the Well Beloved, but by his death he was as thoroughly hated by the people as Louis XIV had been.

Louis XV continued the policies of heavily taxing the poor and spending extravagantly. He knew that he was leaving France in a financial crisis and that terrible problems might follow his reign. His mistress, who also knew that things needed reform, remarked, "*Après nous, le déluge*" (ah PRAY noo luh DAY looj), which means "After us comes the flood." She was right.

A Young Prince

On August 23, 1754, a baby boy was born at the palace of Versailles. A courier was sent to King Louis XV, who was at his other palace, to announce the birth of his grandson, Louis Augustus. The courier never arrived. He was thrown from his horse and broke his neck. Perhaps it was an omen, for the baby boy would grow up to be King Louis XVI, the last absolute monarch of France, who would one day be beheaded in a bloody revolution.

Louis XVI was kind and generous, but he had trouble making decisions. He was more interested in hunting than in the affairs of the country. In spite of his flabby waist and his nearsightedness, Louis was a skilled and fearless hunter. He kept a detailed account of each hunt, totaling the number of stags, deer, and wild boar that he had killed. He also counted up, by month and year, the number of game birds that he had shot.

Once off his horse, Louis was shy and awkward. It was a moment in history when France needed a strong and courageous leader, but Louis was neither of those things. He was an ordinary man, not especially bright or talented or bold. He was not suited to the times.

When Louis was 15, he married the beautiful 14-year-old Marie Antoinette, daughter of the Austrian empress Maria Theresa. Louis adored and indulged his wife. Five years later, Louis and Marie Antoinette took the throne. "I feel like the universe is going to fall on me," Louis said when he became king. And, indeed, it eventually did.